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NEA/MAG FOR HOPKINS, HARRIS
NSC/NESA
NEA/PPD FOR ALBERTO FERNANDEZ AND DAVID FOLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/02/2016
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: EMBASSY OFFICERS BLOCKED FROM MEETING HUMAN RIGHTS
ORGANIZATION IN BIZERTE

REF: A. TUNIS 2408

[1](#)B. TUNIS 1308
[1](#)C. TUNIS 622

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and Action Request: Embassy officers traveled to the northern city of Bizerte on October 5 to meet with the local chapter of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH). Approximately seventeen plain-clothes police physically barred Emboffs from entering the LTDH compound, which is also the residence of LTDH chapter president and long-time opposition activist Ali Ben Salem. LTDH chapters have been prevented from hosting meetings for over a year, after a Tunis court ruled that the organization could not take preparatory actions to hold its Congress, due to a pending lawsuit against the current national leadership. In light of this latest, egregious example of continued GOT interference in the work of Embassy officers, Post suggests Department reciprocate with the Tunisian Embassy in Washington by denying certain meeting requests. Post also suggests Department release a public statement protesting the GOT action (See para. 6). End Summary and Action Request.

[1](#)2. (C) Two Emboffs and PolFSN traveled to Bizerte on October 5th to meet with the regional chapter of the LTDH. The Bizerte chapter, led by Ali Ben Salem, has been a particularly active section of the LTDH, due in part to its location near two prisons, and its human rights work on behalf of prisoners. In June, the Bizerte chapter received widespread attention when it released a communique alleging torture of a prisoner at nearby Borj Erroumi prison, including an allegation that prison guards beat prisoner Ayman Dridi with a Quran. (ICRC Head of Delegation has privately questioned the validity of this allegation.) Ben Salem and other LTDH members were subsequently detained but later released. LTDH headquarters in Bizerte take up the lower part of Ben Salem's residence in downtown Bizerte. In past months, police have reportedly been present in front of the Ben Salem residence around-the-clock, preventing visitors from entering, including, according to Ben Salem, members of his own family. Despite the organization's status as a legal NGO, LTDH chapters throughout the country have reportedly been prevented from hosting meetings for over a year, after a Tunis court ruled that the organization could not take preparatory actions to hold its Congress due to a pending lawsuit challenging the current national leadership, led by lawyer/activist Mokhtar Trifi.

[1](#)3. (C) Upon arrival, Emboffs immediately noticed the presence of three plain-clothed policemen in front of the LTDH/Ben

Salem building. Emboffs did not immediately enter the compound, which was not blocked at this point, as they were waiting for Lotfi Hajji (President of the Tunisian Journalist Syndicate, LTDH member, Al Jazeera correspondent, and Bizerte resident) who had arranged the meeting, to accompany them. While waiting, the police on scene used their telephones, and shortly thereafter positioned themselves in front of the gate, blocking entrance. When asked by Emboff why they could not enter, one of the policemen said they had instructions, and to wait until "the boss" arrived. Ben Salem then appeared in the door behind the police, and, pushing them from behind, began yelling about the injustices of "the dictator Ben Ali."

¶4. (C) Within minutes, more police arrived, and soon there were at least seventeen plain-clothes security agents, according to one Emboff's count. The policeman who was evidently in charge was, according to Hajji, the head of Bizerte district police. When asked again why Emboffs could not meet, he said first that "he had instructions", and secondly, "that there had been a court order that the LTDH could not meet." Emboff countered that the court order was reportedly that the LTDH could not prepare to hold its Congress, and that Emboffs were not meeting with the LTDH to do so. At least seven other members of the LTDH who had come for the meeting with Emboffs were also at the scene, and Emboffs were able to speak with some of them on the premise, although plain-clothes police would sometimes stand close by to listen. (NOTE: While several LTDH members shouted at, and pushed the police officers, the police did not act violently. Other LTDH members appeared to have a civil, at times even joking, rapport with the police officers, whom they noted were only "doing what they were told." END NOTE)

¶5. (C) Pol/EconCouns asked the policeman-in-charge once more why Emboffs could not meet with the LTDH members and who had

handed down this instruction. Contradicting what he had said only minutes earlier to another Emboff, the policeman said that "it was (my) decision". (NOTE: When Post has complained previously to the GOT about overbearing police presence outside of Tunis, the GOT has often chalked it up to local police acting out of line. We suspect, but cannot confirm, that the police officer in Bizerte had been speaking to higher-level officials in Tunis, who told him to say it was his decision. END NOTE). After approximately forty-five minutes of waiting to see if the police would allow the meeting, Emboffs departed, and were followed to the edge of town by an unmarked police vehicle.

¶6. (C) Comment and suggestion: While Emboffs were still on the scene, Charge protested the actions of Bizerte police, during a concurrent, pre-scheduled meeting at the MFA. The event in Bizerte is only the latest, albeit a particularly egregious, example of the GOT's continued actions to frustrate and limit the work of Embassy officials in Tunisia (see reftels). Post notes requests for upcoming meetings of Tunisian Ambassador to Washington Mohamed Nejib Hachana as well as the proposed November Washington visit of FM Abdelwahab Abdullah. In light of the continued interference in the work of Embassy officers, post recommends reciprocity in the form of denying at least some of the requested meetings by Hachana and/or FM Abdullah. Post further recommends Department release a public statement protesting GOT actions in Bizerte and the continued actions of the GOT to prevent Embassy officials from conducting their work. Suggested press guidance/public statement follows:

Question: Can you confirm that Tunisian authorities prohibited a meeting between Embassy officials and members of a Tunisian human rights organization? What is your reaction?

Answer:

-- On October 5, 2006 numerous plain-clothes police officials physically blocked officials of the U.S. Embassy in Tunisia from entering the premises of the Bizerte chapter of the Tunisian League for Human Rights.

-- This meeting had been arranged, at the Embassy's request, to discuss the human rights situation in Tunisia. The LTDH is an authorized non-governmental organization in Tunisia.

-- The United States Government strongly protests this and other actions by the Government to limit the freedom of assembly.

-- As documented in our annual Human Rights Reports and in statements made from this podium, the U.S. Government has long been concerned by curbs on fundamental freedoms in Tunisia. But this action by the Government of Tunisia to prevent U.S. diplomats from conducting an open meeting with well known human rights defenders is a particularly egregious example of these policies.

-- The actions by GOT security agents in Bizerte follow numerous other instances wherein the GOT has interfered in the work of U.S. diplomats in Tunisia.

-- Our Charge d'Affaires in Tunis has protested these actions in Tunisia, and we will be following up here in Washington.

End text.

End Comment and Action Request.
BALLARD